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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001307

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: IR LE PGOV PREL PTER SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: PATRIARCH SFEIR NOT CONFIDENT LAHOUD WILL BE REMOVED

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d)

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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In an April 27 meeting, the Ambassador and econoff discussed with Maronite Patriarch Mar Nasrallah Sfeir the recent visit of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to Washington. Sfeir agreed with the Ambassador on the success of the visit, saying that Justice Minister Charles Rizk had also given him a positive report. The Ambassador told Sfeir that the USG would very much like to host a new democratically elected Lebanese president as well, while the USG will continue to support Lebanon on several fronts. On Lebanese domestic politics, Sfeir lamented how divided the Christian community has become between Michel Aoun and the March 14 Christians allied with Saad Hariri. Sfeir said he had to ask Christian leaders to cease personal attacks on each other after meeting with him. The Patriarch dismissed Aoun as being with Syria and Hezbollah and advised Hariri to do more to reach out to Christians, such as appointing more Christians in the security services. The Ambassador commented that Aoun appears to be involved in all the main problems facing Lebanon by his choice of allies. The Patriarch sighed that it appeared Christian division will probably result in President Lahoud staying in office until his term expires in November 2007. In closing, Sfeir asked the USG to make clear to Syria that it will never be allowed to dominate Lebanon again. End summary.

US READY TO HELP LEBANON

¶2. (C) On April 27, the Ambassador and econoff met with Maronite Patriarch Mar Nasrallah Sfeir at his offices in Bkirki. The Ambassador briefed Sfeir on Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's visit to Washington last week, saying that Siniora had done an excellent job representing Lebanon and its issues. Sfeir agreed, saying that Minister of Justice Charles Rizk (a Maronite minister) had earlier given him a positive readout. Rizk had told Sfeir that the visit was very successful. The Ambassador told Sfeir that the USG would also like to welcome a new, democratically elected Lebanese President to Washington, if that president is truly representative of the new Lebanon. All the doors are open to Lebanon.

¶3. (C) Meanwhile, the Ambassador continued, the USG will continue to support Lebanon on several fronts. Among these, the White House announced yesterday its intention to freeze the assets of any individuals involved in the assassinations

in Lebanon. Second, the French are working on a new UNSC resolution, which the U.S. will support. Third, the USG is supporting efforts to extend the mandate of UNIIC Commissioner Serge Brammertz. The Ambassador explained that the USG would like to move quickly in the UN. Syria must be convinced that the U.S. won't forget Lebanon. Sfeir expressed strong support for all the initiatives described by the Ambassador.

A COMMUNITY DIVIDED

14. (C) Turning to internal Lebanese politics, Sfeir commented that the Lebanese are divided, especially in the Christian community. Sfeir pointed to how he had to ask all Lebanese Christian leaders to cease making statements after meeting with him because they would then use the podium in Bkirki to launch personal attacks against each other. Sfeir said that Syria is making matters worse by continuing to allow the shipment of arms to Hizballah and Palestinian groups, and by using its influence to keep Emile Lahoud in the presidential palace. The climate is not helpful, sighed Sfeir. He met President Lahoud on Easter, and Lahoud told him that he will not allow the majority led by Saad Hariri seize power. Lahoud insisted to Sfeir that the majority is dangerous and only represents Sunni Muslims. Waving a dismissive hand, Sfeir commented to the Ambassador that Lahoud is "handled by the Syrians."

15. (C) Sfeir lamented how MP Michel Aoun had visited him and then used his podium to attack other Christians. Sfeir said that Aoun has some Christians that are still with him despite his ties to Hizballah and pro-Syrian politicians like Suleiman Franjeh. He explained that some Christians are fearful of a state dominated by Sunni Muslims and so are

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drawn to a strong figure like Aoun. Sfeir thought that Hariri needs to hold more meetings with his Christian allies in the March 14 coalition and make his ties to Christians more public. Hariri, according to Sfeir, must also appoint more Christians to the security services to assuage their nervousness. It appears as if all security chiefs are Muslims. (Comment: Technically, that is not true, as Michel Suleiman is LAF Commander and Georges Khoury is G-2 chief. Both are Maronites. End comment.) As for Aoun, Sfeir asserted: "Aoun is with Hizballah. Hizballah is with Syria. So Aoun is with Syria. He is with Syria without saying so."

16. (C) The Ambassador replied that the USG sees four major problems facing Lebanon: continuation of Syrian interference, growing Iranian interference, Hizballah's state within a state, and Sunni extremism. Aoun in some way is involved in each one of these problems through the people he has chosen to surround himself with. We understand that Christians are feeling marginalized but the answer does not lie in not Aoun siding with Hizballah. Sfeir agreed, commenting that he did not think the Aoun-Hizballah alliance was very sincere. Sfeir sighed that it appeared President Lahoud will end up serving out his term until it expires in November 2007.

LOOKING AHEAD

17. (C) The Ambassador asked Sfeir, who mentioned meeting with trade union officials, if he thought labor unions will oppose Siniora's economic reform plan with violence. Sfeir replied that they will hold a meeting on May 1, and will complain. However, he saw no signs that they would resort to violence. In response to the Ambassador's question of how the USG can best help Lebanon, Sfeir replied that all current initiatives are good. Sfeir stressed that it is important that the U.S. take measures to make Syria understand there is no way it will be allowed to dominate Lebanon again. Syria must accept this, he said.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Sfeir was clear: he regrets Lahoud's continued tenure in office, and he does not see Michel Aoun as an appropriate replacement. Yet he seemed unwilling to take any action to remove Lahoud or diminish Aoun's popularity. We believe that, 17 years after Aoun's supporters publicly humiliated him for his support of the Taif accord, Sfeir still fears provoking the wrath of Aoun. In Sfeir's cautious calculations, as bad as Lahoud is, an Aoun presidency is probably considered worse.

FELTMAN